

# Falls and Older Adults

**More than one in three people age 65 years or older falls each year.**

The risk of falling – and fall-related problems – rises with age.

- Each year, more than 1.6 million older U.S. adults go to emergency departments for fall-related injuries.
- Among older adults, falls are the number one cause of fractures, hospital admissions for trauma, loss of independence, and injury deaths.
- Fractures caused by falls can lead to hospital stays and disability.
- Most often, fall-related fractures are in the person's hip, pelvis, spine, arm, hand, or ankle.

**Hip fractures** are one of the most serious types of fall injury.

- They are a leading cause of medical problems and death among older adults.
- Only half of older adults hospitalized for a broken hip can return home or live on their own after the injury.

**Osteoporosis**, a disease that involves loss of bone mass, increases the chance of hip and other fractures if a person falls.

## **Fear of Falling**

- Many older adults are afraid of falling.
- This fear becomes more common as people age, even among those who have not fallen.
- It may lead older people to avoid activities such as walking, shopping, or taking part in social activities.
- Muscles and bones can weaken over time without the physical activity that comes with doing daily tasks or exercise. As a result, a person could become more – not less – likely to fall.

## **Causes and Risk Factors**

Falls do not "just happen," and people do not fall because they get older. Often, more than one underlying cause or risk factor is involved in a fall. As the number of risk factors rises, so does the risk of falling.

- Many falls are linked to a person's physical condition or a medical problem, such as a chronic disease.
- Other causes could be safety hazards in the person's home or community environment.

## **Muscle weakness**

- One of the most important risk factors is muscle weakness.
- Older people with weak muscles are more likely to fall than are those who maintain their muscle strength, as well as their flexibility and endurance.

**Balance and gait** are other key factors.

- Older adults who have poor balance or difficulty walking are more likely than others to fall.
- These problems may be linked to a lack of exercise or to a neurological cause, arthritis, or another condition that might be treated or managed.

## **Postural hypotension**

- Blood pressure that drops too much when standing from lying down or sitting can increase the chance of falling.
- Might be a result from a drop in blood volume, dehydration, or certain medications. It might also be linked to diabetes, Parkinson's disease, or an infection.
- Some people with postural hypotension feel dizzy when their blood pressure drops. Other people do not feel dizzy, even if their blood pressure drops a lot when they get up.

## **Slow reflexes**

- Reflexes may also be slower than when younger.
- The increased amount of time it takes to react may make it harder to maintain balance when starting to fall.

## **Foot problems**

- Painful feet, and wearing unsafe footwear can increase the chance of falling.
- Backless shoes and slippers, high-heeled shoes, and shoes with smooth leather soles are examples of unsafe footwear that could cause a fall.

**Sensory problems** can cause falls, too.

- Having numb feet may mean a person will not sense where they are stepping.

## **Eye sight**

- Not seeing well can also result in falls.
- It may take a while for eyes to adjust to see clearly when moving between darkness and light.
- Other vision problems include poor depth perception, cataracts, and glaucoma.
- Wearing multi-focal glasses while walking or having poor lighting around the home can also lead to falls.

## **Confusion**

- Even if it is only for a short while, confusion in older adults can sometimes lead to falls. For example, waking up in an unfamiliar environment may make a person feel unsure about where they are. When a person feels confused, it is best to wait for a few minutes for him/her to clear the mind before trying to get up and walk around.

## **Medication**

- Medications cause side effects like dizziness or confusion.
- Drug interactions can also lead to falls.
- The more medications taken, the more likely a person is to fall. People who take four or more prescription drugs have a greater risk of falling than do people who take fewer drugs.
- Never add or stop taking medications without talking with the doctor first.
- Ask the doctor if changes in medications could lower the risk of falls.

***All falls should be reported to the doctor.*** A fall could be a sign of a medical problem such as an infection or a cardiovascular disorder. It could also suggest that a chronic ailment, such as Parkinson's disease or dementia, is progressing.

Adapted from "Falls," U.S. National Library of Medicine. Retrieved from <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/falls.html>, October 2013.